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British mercenaries in Libya 'for rot-gut whisky'

By IAN BRODIE in Honolulu, Hawaii

A FORMER Green Beret, who was apparently misled into going to Libya as a military instructor, said yesterday that he had met half a dozen British mercenaries there who were also helping Col. Gaddafi's armed forces.

"The Brits were very popular in Tripoli because they got around the ban on alcohol by making their own whisky," said Mr. Luke Thompson, 47, a retired master sergeant now living in Hawaii.

The Britons, like Mr. Thompson, had been recruited by Edwin Wilson, the former CIA agent who has made a fortune helping to train and equip Col. Gaddafi's forces.

In an interview, Mr. Thompson said he learned that London was pivotal to Wilson's operation. "He told me always to stop there on my way to or from the United States.

"He said it was useful for picking up supplies, getting new orders and especially for hand-carrying large amounts of cash.

"That was his way of smuggling big sums back home, just sticking it in a shirt pocket. They had so much money that \$100 notes came at you like Green Shield stamps."

Told of safe houses

On his one trip to Britain, Thompson flew from Libya to Gatwick where he was met by Miss Roberta Barnes, an

American working for a Wilson company called Brillhurst.

He visited the company's office in Hans Road, Knightsbridge, West London, and stayed overnight at the Berkeley Hotel, leaving for Washington the next day on Concorde.

He did not visit the Wilson safe houses in Sussex, but was told about them.

Mr. Thompson said he knew the British mercenaries only by their first names. "They were hardcore people, not run-of-the-mill soldiers."

List experience

He met them one evening in July 1977, in Tripoli, when they were all summoned to a meeting with Libya's chief of intelligence, Abdullah Sanussi, who is Col. Gaddafi's brother-in-law.

"There were about 17 people in the room at the Ministry of Trade. Sanussi introduced us to a Capt. Hadjazi and said we would be now under his operational control. Then we all had to fill out sheets of foolscap listing our military experience and specialities.

"I don't drink, but my people who tried the British rot-gut whisky said it was OK. It had to have something going for it, because it was the only game in town."

Being put under the command of a Libyan officer was one of several factors that convinced Mr. Thompson after four weeks he was not on a bona fide CIA mission, as he had been told.

He fled to America and poured out his remarkable story to military intelligence officers.

An extraordinary feature of Mr. Thompson's narrative is that he was still a serving soldier when he was approached to go to Libya. The approach was made by Patrick Loomis, a CIA agent who has since been sacked.

Mr. Thompson said he checked with military intelligence officers who, after some hesitation, told him to go ahead with the mission until they ordered him to stop.

Satisfied with these instructions, and with the encouragement of a commanding officer, Mr. Thompson rounded up four friends who had recently retired from the Green Berets.

They flew to Zurich and met Wilson at the airport. Thompson said: "He told us he wouldn't bargain with us — the pay was \$6,500 (£3,400) a month with a \$10,000 (£5,260) bonus at the end of a year.

But Mr. Thompson became suspicious, particularly of one Wilson aide, Doug Schlacter, who has since been indicted for illegal explosives exports.

Mr. Thompson said he could not believe the CIA would employ such an incompetent and he decided to fly home to find out.

"When I got there and called military intelligence they said: 'Thank God you're back. We were worried about you. What you are doing is totally illegal.'"